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The Developing Vietnamese Army: Growth Pains and Implications for Regional Security [redacted]

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An Intelligence Assessment

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The Developing Vietnamese Army: Growth Pains and Implications for Regional Security

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An Intelligence Assessment

This paper was prepared by Office of East Asian Analysis, and Office of Imagery Analysis. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Southeast Asia Division, OEA.

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The Developing Vietnamese Army: Growth Pains and Implications for Regional Security

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Key Judgments

Information available as of 15 July 1986 was used in this report.

China and Thailand are the nations most affected by the growing military power of the Vietnamese Army, which with over 1 million men has emerged as the largest and most powerful army in Southeast Asia. Although we believe the odds are overwhelmingly against large-scale Vietnamese military action against Thailand, Vietnam has decided superiority and probably could rout Thai defenses along the Cambodian border with forces already deployed there. But several factors will restrict into the 1990s Hanoi's ability to bring its growing military power to bear on other nations in the region. Most important, we believe that Vietnam is eager to end its diplomatic isolation and reopen Western aid and trade channels. The normalization of relations with the United States tops Vietnam's international political agenda, in our view, and Hanoi almost certainly realizes that military moves against vital US regional interests would dash its already remote propects for achieving this goal. In addition:

- Vietnam will remain outmanned and outgunned by China indefinitely, and we rate the chances for rapprochement between the two as extremely low for the next several years. As a result, the bulk of Vietnamese combat power will be tied down in the north, defending the border with China. Hanoi appears confident that its forces can do the job, however.

- The Vietnamese military's ability to project conventional power in the region is extremely limited and almost certainly will remain so indefinitely. Air Force and Navy assets are primarily defensive, and their development will be hindered by severe budget limitations.

- Several member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations are concerned over growing Vietnamese military power, but they appear to recognize Hanoi's limitations. In fact, Malaysia, Indonesia, and some officials in Thailand still consider China their major long-term threat despite Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia. Those Thai officials who see Vietnam as the main threat are more concerned about subversion than conventional invasion.

We believe Vietnam's progress in developing modern conventional forces will be steady but slow. A continuing influx of Soviet weapons over the past few years has helped ease serious equipment shortages in the Vietnamese Army, but Hanoi is tackling more difficult problems that require fundamental changes in organization and doctrine. We believe reformist trends

within the Army will continue, as increasingly professional soldiers emerge from the Army and fill the ranks of the Vietnamese Communist Party. We also believe residual resistance to reforms will erode with the passing of party ideologues more closely associated with Vietnam's struggle for independence and reunification:

- The adoption of a Soviet-style one-man command system underscores more than any other factor the Army's increasing professionalism and autonomy, because it enhances the military commander's authority and places limits on political cadres. Overall party control of the military remains unchallenged, however.

- The Vietnamese are refining training methods to emphasize the development of competent combat officers well versed in military doctrine and strategy, the operation of modern weapon systems, and leadership. But improvement will be slow because of the lack of qualified instructors, resistance to new training programs, and a shortage of training materials.

- The Army also has been experimenting with Soviet-style combined-arms doctrine, but the full integration of infantry, armor, and artillery remains elusive.

Although Hanoi will continue to rely heavily on its unique "people's war" doctrine, we believe Army modernization will proceed along Soviet lines, largely because of Vietnam's dependence on Soviet materiel and advisers. We estimate that Moscow provides between $600 million and $800 million annually in military aid and has 2,500 advisers working with Vietnamese Army units down to regimental level. In return, Vietnam affords the Soviets access to facilities at Cam Ranh Bay and political support in international forums.

Hanoi probably is discomfited by its nearly total dependence on the Soviets because this gives Moscow leverage that could be used to control Vietnamese military activities or to regulate the pace and extent of force modernization. We believe, however, that the Soviets would use their leverage only in the most extreme circumstances because they realize their access to Cam Ranh Bay would hang in the balance.

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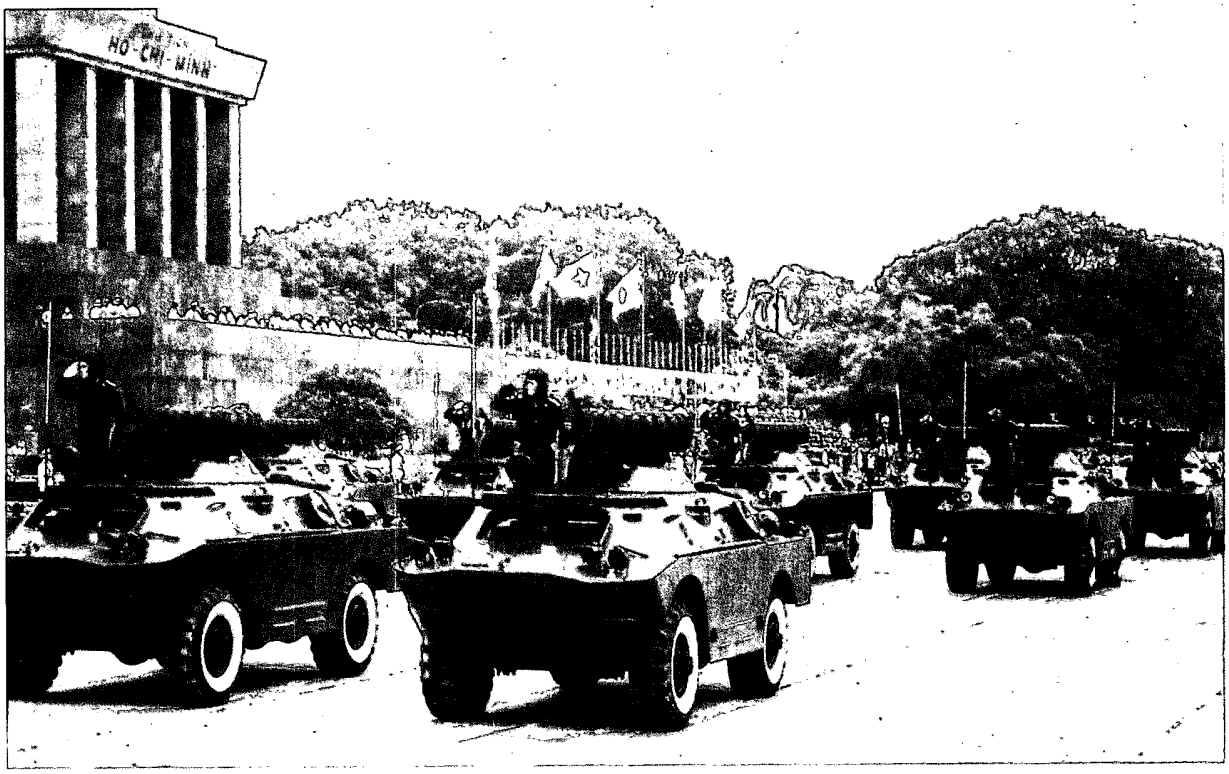

Figure 1. *"We must accelerate the development of our Army into a revolutionary people's Army that possesses an unshakable will to win, strict discipline, and a serious bearing, an Army that becomes more regular and modern with each passing day and is constantly achieving a higher state of combat readiness . . . we must establish the proper relationships between size and quality, between the Army's revolutionary character and its regular force and modern character, between manpower and weapons/technical equipment . . . only in this way can our Army meet the requirements of the people's war. . . ."* Tap Chi Cong San, *December 1984*

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The Developing Vietnamese Army: Growth Pains and Implications for Regional Security

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Background

The People's Army of Vietnam began over 40 years ago as a collection of guerrilla bands organized by Ho Chi Minh and his chief military adviser, Vo Nguyen Giap, under a united front called the Viet Minh. These forces implemented Ho's strategy of combined armed and political action by the entire population in an effort to win independence and, later, to reunify the country. With a standing force of over 1 million troops, however, the Vietnamese Army has evolved into a conventional army that is now among the five largest in the world and an institution second in importance only to the Communist Party of Vietnam. The Army plays a pivotal role in internal security and national defense and is a major tool of Vietnamese foreign policy in the region, with nearly 200,000 troops propping up client regimes in Cambodia and Laos (see inset).

Preparing for Modern Warfare

Strategists in Hanoi several years ago realized that the Army must keep pace with modern conventional warfare doctrine to ensure national security. Most of Vietnam's early military success stemmed from the use of guerrilla tactics in long wars of attrition, but Hanoi's strike in 1975 into South Vietnam demonstrated to the Vietnamese the importance of conventional forces. Moreover, China's foray in 1979 into Vietnam underscored that Hanoi was unprepared to defend against a large conventional attack. As a result of the Chinese threat, Vietnam launched the largest buildup of conventional forces in the history of the Army as it scrambled to strengthen its defenses against a potential "second lesson." In addition to the massive amount of Soviet equipment that has flowed into Vietnamese inventories over the past several years, Hanoi has undertaken a number of steps that entail fundamental organizational and doctrinal changes to modernize the Army.

The process is a slow one, however, and Army efforts to implement sweeping reforms in doctrine and organization are hindered by numerous problems. We believe ideologues oppose efforts to improve professionalism within the Army, to streamline command and control, to revamp training methods, and to develop modern conventional forces, probably in part because these reforms go against basic precepts of party ideology and tradition. In addition, efforts to improve the officer corps and recruit training programs are impeded by a serious shortage of qualified instructors and training materials. Faculties at military academies include teachers with no basic training, no practical experience, and, in some cases, no high school education. Moreover, the academies lack textbooks, their training does not adequately simulate actual combat conditions, and they are mired in redtape.

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Greater Autonomy for the Military. Vietnam's most radical reform has been its redefinition of the traditional relationship between the Vietnamese Communist Party and the military. The Army in 1980 formally adopted the one-man command system that increases the independence and authority of unit commanders and places limits on the party's political cadres. According to the Vietnamese press:

> *The new mechanism of party leadership in the Army entrusts the execution of military political tasks to a single commander. The function of political commissar is abolished. The unit commander leads and manages all military, political, logistic, and technical activities and is responsible for them to the party and the state. In this way, he can fully display his sense of initiative and take timely decisions in all circumstances. The party basic organization . . . takes no decision on operational plans, targets, and measures concerning production and technique.*

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The move was intended to streamline command and control and, in our judgment, signifies, more than any other factor, the emphasis on increasing professionalism within the military. It also signals Hanoi's admis

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Vietnamese Forces in Cambodia and Laos

Vietnamese ground units in Cambodia can be characterized as a separate, second Army because their organization and mission are markedly different from forces in Vietnam. Military deployments appear to be based on economy of force, because Hanoi's 130,000 to 140,000 troops can retain control in Cambodia and can ensure the survival of the Heng Samrin regime but are unable to defeat the resistance or even to secure the countryside. Moreover, these units have a counterinsurgency mission, while those in northern Vietnam are charged with defending against a conventional invasion. Vietnamese forces in Cambodia are undermanned and ill equipped for the most part. For example, infantry divisions vary in size from 6,000 to 8,500 troops compared with 10,000 for divisions in the three northern military regions. Much of their equipment is obsolete and ill maintained, coming from captured US inventories, although some more modern Soviet weapons, such as D-30 artillery pieces, have been seen in Cambodia. In addition, enlisted ranks are filled almost exclusively by poorly trained and unmotivated conscripts from southern Vietnam while the officer corps is from the north.

The Army also has created organizational structures that are unique to Cambodia. For example, the Army has formed joint Vietnamese–People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) groups throughout Cambodia to help maintain internal security and to groom PRK units for an increased security role. The groups consist of between four and 10 infantry battalions, a headquarters, several support companies, and Vietnamese advisers to the PRK local militia. Depending upon their location, manning levels in the groups vary from less than 100 to 3,000, suggesting that their organization is mission specific. For example, those groups in the more secure eastern provinces are smaller than those in areas where the resistance is more active.

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For the past 10 years or so, Vietnam also has maintained 40,000 to 50,000 troops in Laos to bolster the Vietnamese-installed regime there. The low level of insurgency activity in Laos permits Hanoi to delegate primary responsibility for counterinsurgency operations to the Lao People's Army so that Vietnamese troops can maintain a relatively low profile. Nonetheless, Vietnamese units are active in operations against the resistance, and, although the insurgency is little more than a nuisance for the government, we believe the internal security situation in Laos would deteriorate markedly if the Vietnamese withdrew and turned over all security responsibilities to the far less capable Lao Army.

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sion that its tradition of decision by consensus is inappropriate for successful conventional warfare. Moreover, we believe the new command structure underscores the paramount importance of national security because Vietnam has opted to improve military effectiveness at the expense of a basic precept of party ideology.

We believe the trend toward greater autonomy for the Army will continue. Despite some differences of opinion, the one-man command structure that alters Ho Chi Minh's military blueprint was adopted by staunch revolutionary ideologues who were longtime members of Ho's inner circle.[1] As the Politburo's old guard gives way to leaders not as closely identified with the struggle for Vietnam's independence and reunification, we believe residual resistance to reforms that challenge the traditional party-military relationship will erode further. Moreover, the party draws most of its members from the military, according to US diplomats, and this ensures future support for the Army's development and reform programs.

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[1] Although the new command system was endorsed by Vietnam's top leadership, we believe the decision sparked a continuing debate between military reformers and party ideologues. The debate often surfaces in Vietnamese press articles with ideologues emphasizing the importance of party control over the military while reformers insist that developing an effective modern army should be Hanoi's top priority. But, despite disagreements on the proper role of military commanders and political cadres, overall party control of the military remains unchallenged. In fact, military journalists, who take great pains to underscore the party's pivotal role in national security, generally portray the new system as a measure to strengthen party control over the Army.

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Figure 2. "... improving the quality of the corps of cadre ... is the key [to] improving the quality of our Army." Tap Chi Cong San, *December 1984*

Developing the Officer Corps. The Vietnamese also are moving to improve their corps of military leaders. Over the past year or two, we have noted increased emphasis in Vietnamese military publications on the need for professional combat officers. The Army apparently believes its officers are unprepared to lead its larger and technically more complicated conventional forces. For example, the former director of schools for the Defense Ministry admits that many units are still commanded by noncommissioned officers or officers with no basic training. Moreover, there appears to be dissatisfaction at senior levels within the Army with the quality of trained commissioned officers. Some have been criticized for their lack of practical skills, leadership ability, and knowledge of military theory.

Because of these deficiencies, Vietnamese officials have called for a transformation of the military's approach to selecting and training its officers. Although candidates almost certainly must meet stringent political standards, Hanoi clearly is emphasizing the development of combat officers well versed in military doctrine and strategy, the operation of modern weapon systems, and leadership. The prominence accorded this issue in military journals suggests a fundamental change in Vietnamese thinking that will further the cause of professionalism in the Army. Hanoi almost certainly recognizes, however, that its system for training officers will take years to correct, ruling out rapid improvement in the officer corps.

New Emphasis on Training Recruits. Vietnam is also refining the quality of training for both recruits and units. Recent Vietnamese military media articles call for improvements in both the content and methods of training by incorporating lessons from combat with the Chinese and the Cambodian resistance. They also have mentioned a more personalized "new method" of training that tailors curriculum levels to individual abilities. The essays hint that specialized combat training has been introduced in the standardized basic training package of political subjects, combat skills, and infantry tactics. Reform advocates argue for a more uniform and structured application of supplemental training, probably in conjunction with basic training, rather than after recruits are assigned to combat units.

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The training task is formidable. Vietnam's million-man Army requires a constant flow of new recruits to maintain force levels (see figures 3 and 4). Although actual numbers are difficult to ascertain, we believe that as many as 200,000 draft-eligible youths, nearly one-third of those who reach age 17 annually, are inducted into the Army—most of them destined for the 66 infantry divisions. Although Vietnamese media and defector reporting indicate some inadequacies in achieving conscription goals, the Army appears capable of meeting present manpower requirements and reportedly shortens the training process during crises.

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Introducing Combined-Arms Doctrine.

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the Army has been experimenting with the combined-arms concept for the past two decades, but moving from organization to full integration of infantry, armor, and artillery remains an elusive goal.[2]

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fitness, and political indoctrination.

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According to these defectors, basic training battalions average 400 recruits per training cycle with three or four cycles annually, for a total of 1,200 to 1,600 trained recruits per year. The larger training centers have as many as 12 training battalions and the capacity to turn out 14,000 to 19,000 graduates per year. The size and training capacity of the centers vary from regimental- to divisional-strength units.

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The training centers run new recruits through a three-month training cycle that stresses military drill, rifle training, infantry tactics, grenade throwing, physical

According to defectors, most graduates of the military region and army corps training centers are assigned to operational infantry units, where they may receive some additional training specific to the unit's combat mission. Replacements for units in Cambodia are drawn from military regions 4, 5, 7, and 9, and replacements for units in Laos are drawn from military region 4.

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As late as March 1986, according to press reports, the Chief of the General Staff praised the combat training department for "research and experiments on combat tactics of inter-arms units in offensive and defensive units," indicating Soviet combined-arms doctrine is still in the "Vietnamization" process.

Nevertheless, defector reporting indicate that three motorized infantry divisions have been formed (see figure 5), one in each strategic army corps in northern Vietnam. the deployment of Soviet-manufactured armored personnel carriers and self-propelled antiaircraft artillery in the north in recent years (see figure 6).

Backup for the Regular Army. The Vietnamese have also emphasized the need to develop the reserve forces that play a critical role in their defensive strategy. We believe the militia and self-defense forces, drawn respectively from the rural and urban population, have three missions: to defend their locales against foreign invaders, to provide internal security, and to engage in industrial and agricultural production (see figure 7). We estimate the membership of the two groups is about 1.6 million and most of them are in the north. A recent Vietnamese military essay on the defense achievements of Binh Tri Thien Province alleged 9 percent of the province's population of 1.8 million were members of the militia and self-defense units; this was touted as an accomplishment, because two-thirds of the population of the reconstituted province were formerly under the control of the Republic of South Vietnam. In the northern provinces, figures for membership in reserve forces of over 50 percent of the inhabitants are claimed for "good combat villages."

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The size and quality and the weapons of militia and self-defense units appear to vary according to geographic location and to the proximity of the enemy. According to Vietnamese defectors, southern units are armed only with light infantry weapons, and lower echelon units are underarmed. In contrast, Vietnamese military media claim that militia and self-defense units along the Chinese-Vietnamese border are well organized, well equipped, and prepared to defend their "home areas," although they acknowledge technical and tactical weaknesses among such units.

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Vietnamese military media essays extolling an offensive role for the militia and self-defense forces are overstating the capabilities of these units, in our view. Within the context of a "people's war" doctrine, those units that were well trained and well organized would be able to conduct guerrilla warfare against an enemy invader, in addition to providing support and assistance to main force units. Because of their better equipment, advanced training, and higher motivation, we believe paramilitary forces in the north are the most adept at their assigned role. Meanwhile, equipment shortages and recruit indifference will continue to degrade the proficiency of southern units for at least the next several years.

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The Soviet Umbilical Cord

Vietnamese efforts to develop modern conventional forces depend almost entirely on Soviet materiel and advisers. We estimate that Moscow provides between $600 million and $800 million annually in military assistance, and 2,500 military advisers are working with Vietnamese units down to the regimental level. In return, Hanoi provides the Soviets access to Cam Ranh Bay and political support in international forums.

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Vietnam's adoption of the one-man command system and its motorized infantry divisions and a Spetsnaz-type commando unit are signatures of Soviet influence on Vietnamese military development.[3] Much to

[3] defector reporting indicate that Vietnam is developing a Soviet-style Spetsnaz (Special Purpose Forces) commando unit that provides an airborne unconventional warfare capability. The 1,500-man unit reportedly was formed in 1980 and a defector reports that its wartime mission is to infiltrate behind enemy lines to collect intelligence and to conduct sabotage operations. Thailand and China were identified as possible theaters of operation.

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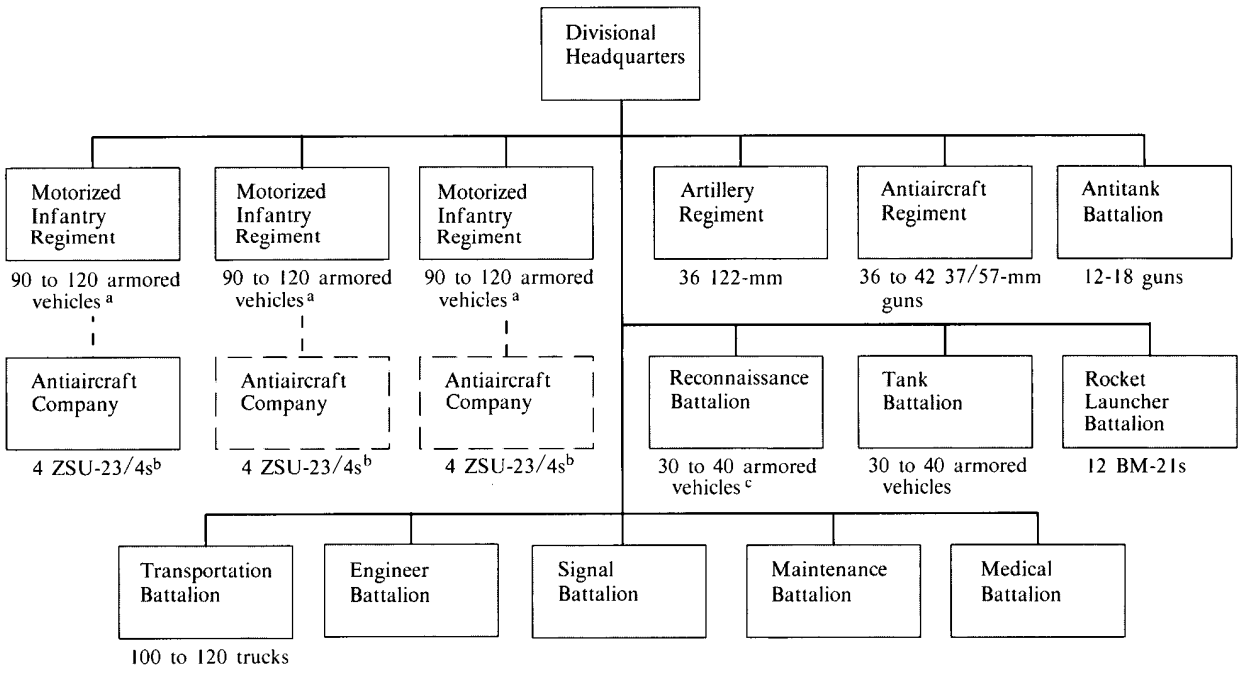
Figure 5
Estimated Organization of a Vietnamese Motorized Infantry Division



[a] [redacted] Vietnamese military media indicate that at least one regiment in each of the three known motorized infantry division is fully equipped with BMPs. The remaining regiments may still have BTR-60s, BTR-152s, or troop-carrying cargo trucks in their inventory.

[c] According to the same report, the reconnaissance battalion is equipped with BRDM-2s, [redacted] BTR-60s, PT-76s and/or M113s may still be part of the unit's assets.

Note: Dashed boxes indicate units may not be present.

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Moscow's dismay, however, the stubbornly independent Vietnamese have made it clear that there are limits to the desirability and practicality of adopting Soviet doctrine. Although military journals openly encourage the armed forces to consider Soviet methodology, they are careful to emphasize that Vietnam's unique situation requires a unique Vietnamese solution. The Vietnamese also draw extensively on what they consider their own illustrious military history in fashioning a doctrine best suited to their circumstances. [redacted]

In any event, we judge that Vietnam will remain almost totally dependent on the Soviet Union for military hardware and supplies. Even if the US-led Western trade and aid embargo were lifted, it would be difficult for Hanoi to replace Moscow's $2 billion annual economic and military aid package. Moreover, Vietnam's embryonic defense industries will be unable to compensate for even a modest reduction in Soviet material assistance, at least through the turn of the century. [redacted]

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Figure 6
Equipment of Vietnam's
Motorized Infantry Divisions

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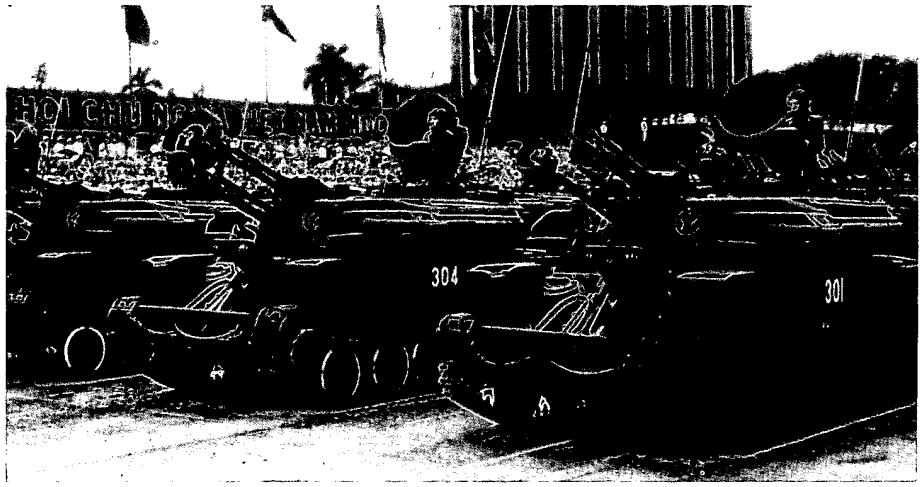

BMP-2

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Figure 6 (continued)

BTR-60

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Hanoi probably is uncomfortable with its dependence on the Soviet supply line because it gives Moscow leverage that could damage Vietnamese interests. The Soviets can regulate the pace and extent of Vietnamese military modernization by regulating the type and amount of equipment they provide. Moscow has already constrained Vietnamese Air Force modernization by refusing to provide MIG-23 aircraft, citing the similarities in capabilities between the MIG-21 and Chinese fighter aircraft. But larger Soviet and Vietnamese strategic goals also make for a degree of mutual dependence. We believe that, as a result, Moscow would use its leverage only in the most extreme circumstances because it realizes that access to Cam Ranh Bay hangs in the balance.

The Regional Security Equation

Several factors will restrict Vietnam's ability into the 1990s to bring its growing conventional military power to bear on other nations in the region. The major constraint on the Vietnamese, in our view, is their overriding concern for the security of their border with China, whose forces are quantitatively superior at least and are in the midst of an ambitious modernization program. We rate the chances for rapprochement between the two historical adversaries as extremely low for the next several years, and, therefore, we believe the Chinese threat will continue to be the most important factor in Hanoi's strategic calculations and will keep the bulk of Vietnamese combat power tied down in the north.

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Vietnam appears confident that its forces are capable of defending against a Chinese invasion, however, and probably judges that its present defensive scheme has raised the potential costs and reduced the chances of success enough to deter a large-scale Chinese assault across the border. Hanoi's confidence probably was

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Figure 7
Vietnamese Regional Forces and Militiawomen

"Increasing the comprehensive quality and fighting strength of the militia and self-defense forces is one of the most important tasks . . . [they] will become an impressive element in a military trap laid out to decimate and destroy the enemy." Nhan Dan, *May 1984*

bolstered by its strong showing against the Chinese during the brief 1979 border war, when Vietnam had less than 10 combat divisions in the north—it now has over 40 divisions there—and before the Army's intensive expansion and modernization effort of the past seven years (see inset The lack of a decisive Chinese reaction to Vietnam's unprecedented 1984/85 dry season offensive in Cambodia undoubtedly has bolstered Hanoi's assessment of Chinese reluctance to expand the conflict. Since then, sustained Chinese military pressure along the border has not deterred the Vietnamese from operations in Cambodia they deem necessary, largely because China has signaled clearly that no "second lesson" is in the offing by limiting its operations to the remote and strategically unimportant border area near Malipo.

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Even if the Chinese military threat were removed as a constraint on the Vietnamese, Hanoi's capabilities to project power by air or by sea are minimal. The Vietnamese Navy is primarily a coastal defense force with few major combat and transport ships. Hanoi has formed a fledgling Marine Corps and intends eventually to improve and expand this force and to develop amphibious landing capabilities, according to military press reports. But we believe the Navy will continue to focus its modernization efforts primarily on antisubmarine warfare and we doubt that it will be able to conduct seaborne offensive combat operations or even successfully to reinforce and defend its holdings in the Spratly Islands any time soon.[4]

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The Vietnamese Air Force is equipped primarily with MIG-21s, which are best suited for air defense, although they have a limited ground attack capability. The Air Force does have 40 SU-22 Fitter fighter-bombers and 30 MI-24 Hind helicopter gunships, but the Vietnamese rarely conduct joint-service exercises to practice close air support. The Air Force also has a small airlift capability with about 150 medium- and short-range transport aircraft. Finally, we believe development of the Air Force and Navy will continue to be seriously hindered because on Vietnam's defense budget priority list these services rank a distant second and third, respectively, behind the Army.

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Vietnam's continuing low-level hostilities with China and its limited capability to project power markedly reduce the conventional Vietnamese threat to most other nations in the region, in our view. Several other

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Defending the Northern Provinces

Vietnamese media, indicate that the specter of a large-scale Chinese invasion has prompted Hanoi to formulate comprehensive defense plans that in effect transform the northern provinces into armed camps.

Hanoi's defense preparations, however, go well beyond the deployment of over 40 infantry divisions. Vietnamese military media continue to issue dramatic calls for the defense of the "Fatherland," the implications of which cast each citizen as a combatant. The people of the northern districts are expected to provide for their own defense, including the troops and the logistics. Current Vietnamese media extoll the ideal of defending the northern provinces with militia, self-defense, and regional forces, backed by the output of the combat villages, combat enterprises, and combat factories. This mobilization of society requires a population base that is lacking in the northern provinces. Hanoi's answer to that problem is population redistribution—a program to move thousands of people from populated lowland provinces to new economic zones in the northern border provinces and other sparsely populated areas. However, building up the soldier-worker population along the border through resettlement is a long-term solution.

Over the short term, Hanoi will defend the border with a mix of main force divisions, regional forces, and provincial militia. The strategic army corps will remain a mobile strike force, a role shaped by current military doctrine, which recognizes terrain limitations. Meanwhile, Hanoi is striving to extend the range of the Army's mobile formations by improving the road network. indicate the construction of new "strategic" roads, apparently designed to permit the rapid movement of troops and logistics to threatened areas and improve lines of communication in the border provinces. the "on-the-spot" forces will not only be expected to bear the brunt of the initial onslaught, but also contain and harass the enemy while the strategic corps prepare to launch a counteroffensive.

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Southeast Asian nations apparently agree with this assessment. Both Indonesia and Malaysia rank China as their major security problem despite Vietnam's growing military power. Although Thailand claims frontline status because of Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia, many Thai officials believe that China presents the most serious long-term threat.[5] On the other hand, those officials who consider Vietnam to be the major threat are far more fearful of Vietnamese subversion than invasion, and this concern probably would intensify if Hanoi consolidated control over Cambodia.

Although we believe large-scale Vietnamese military action against Thailand is extremely unlikely, Hanoi, in our view, could easily rout Thai defenses in the central border region—the strategic approach to Bangkok—with Army units already in Cambodia.[6] But Vietnam's political and economic agendas, as much as any other factor, will inhibit its use of force against Thailand, in our judgment. Hanoi clearly is eager to end its international isolation—in part, to

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[5] China supported Communist insurgent groups in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand for years and still refuses to renounce party-to-party ties.

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reopen Western economic aid and trade channels closed by its invasion and occupation of Cambodia. We believe the Vietnamese also realize that large-scale military action against Thailand probably would entail even more severe international political and military costs. For example, the Vietnamese almost certainly believe such a move against vital US regional interests would dash their already remote prospects for achieving official diplomatic relations with the United States—a goal that, in our view, is at the top of Hanoi's international political agenda. [redacted] 25X1

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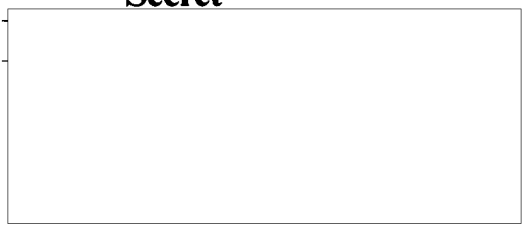

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